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AUTHOR	Rivers, William P.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the characteristics and behaviors of college students learning a third language. Four groups of students with backgrounds in Slavic second languages and enrolled in a variety of Slavic and non-Slavic third languages courses were studied using ethnographic techniques, including open-ended questionnaires, focus groups, classroom observation, and interviews. Subjects were from three programs: a 1993-94 program in languages of the former Soviet Union at the University of Maryland at College Park; a language cross-training program at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (California) (DLI); and a DLI study of the effectiveness of foreign language immersion training. The proficiency outcomes of third-language learners were compared with those of learners in similar second-language courses. Two results emerged: (1) third-language learners are highly successful; they learn more language faster than second language learners of the same target language; and (2) their behaviors are those of the self-directed learner. Implications of self-directed second-language learning for the learner of less commonly taught languages and for learning outside formal language programs are discussed. Contains 88 references. (MSE)

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Self-Directed Language Learning and the Third-Language Learner

0. Abstract:

The third-language learner presents a unique challenge in Second Language Acquisition research. How does experience in acquiring one foreign language affect acquisition of additional languages? Are there behaviors and characteristics common to third-language learners? Four groups of third language learners with backgrounds in Slavic languages and enrolled in a variety of Slavic and non-Slavic languages were examined using ethnographic techniques. Open-ended questionnaires, focus groups, classroom observations, and interviews were used to develop a description of the learning behaviors and biographical characteristics of third-language learners. The proficiency outcomes of learners in third-language courses were compared to those of learners in similar second language courses. Two results obtain: first, third-language learners are highly successful: they learn more language faster than second language learners of the same Target Language. Second, the behaviors of the third-language learner are those of the Self-Directed Learner (Ellis, 1994; Bachman, 1964; Holec, 1980, 1987; Dickinson, 1987; Gardner et al., 1976; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1991; Schumann and Schumann, 1977.) Two implications of self-directed learning in Second Language Acquisition are discussed: the experienced learner in the Less Commonly Taught Languages, and learning outside of formal programs.

1. Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge three colleagues: Victor Frank, of Bryn Mawr College, and Richard Brecht and the late A. Ronald Walton, both of the National Foreign Language Center. My discussions and arguments with them on the nature of self-directed language learning in the context of third language learning formed the genesis of this paper. This paper has profited from the close attention and thoughtful suggestions of several colleagues, foremost among whom are Kimberly Fedchak and Professor Marc Boots-Ebenfield, both of Bryn Mawr College. An earlier draft of this paper received numerous comments and revisions from Professor Elizabeth Cheresh Allen and my colleagues in Professor Allen's Doctoral Writing Seminar at Bryn Mawr College.

2. Introduction

Most research on second language acquisition has the second language learner as its focus. Scant attention has been paid to third language learners, by which I mean anyone learning a language beyond a second language. How do third language learners, due to a knowledge of a second language, differ from second language learners? I will answer that question by first rephrasing it. The question can be better stated as "how does experience in second-language learning affect the learner's further acquisition of foreign languages?"

Geopolitical and economic developments in the last few years have combined to radically increase the number of languages needed by different agencies of the U. S. government, while at the same time restricting the resources available for training. Given that the majority of federal linguists had been trained in Russian, and that the government now perceived a surplus of Russian speakers, efforts were begun in the early 1990's to retrain these Russian speakers in other languages, both Slavic (e.g. Serbo-Croatian) and non-Slavic (e.g., Georgian.) Other agencies, such as the State Department, had been retraining limited numbers of personnel for many years, typically in closely-related languages (e.g., from Spanish into Portuguese.) A widely held but unproven belief

concerning these retraining efforts was that they saved substantially on the resources required to reach a given proficiency goal, when compared to basic courses in the same language - courses which enroll monolingual adult English speakers.

In this paper, I will report on the results of two ethnographic research projects on third-language learners and experienced language learners. Each project had as its focus the description of the learning behaviors of the third-language learner, and the identification of any advantages the third-language learner enjoys in the further acquisition of foreign languages, when compared to second-language learners. The first project investigated the learning behaviors and attitudes of adult speakers of Russian learning three Central Asian languages in an intensive course format. The second project investigated the advantages afforded to Russian (and other Slavic) speakers learning Serbo-Croatian in an intensive format. A third project investigated the effects of immersion training. The results of this third project illuminate the findings on self-directed language learning and experienced learners, and provide a backdrop for one of the two implications of self-directed language learning: the learner outside of a formal program.

3. Subjects and Methods

The first research project was conducted during the Languages of the Former Soviet Union Program at the University of Maryland at College Park during the 1993 - 1994 academic year. In this program, Georgian, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz were taught in an intensive format to adult learners. Participating students were at or higher than a 2 on the ILR scale in Russian in Listening, Reading, and Speaking. There were three students in the Georgian course, eight in the Kazakh course, and five in the Kyrgyz course, for a total of sixteen students. The course met for 25 hours per week for 37 weeks. The goal of each course was Listening and Reading proficiency of 2. However, the methods an approaches used by the course instructors were not aimed at the development of specific modalities.

It was hypothesized that this particular group of students consisted of Expert Language Learners - that is, learners with sufficient experience at language learning and sufficient awareness of that experience to make conscious use of it in their third-language courses. Three ethnographic methods were employed to elicit data: monthly classroom observations, informal weekly focus groups with the students, and weekly survey questionnaires, all aimed at documenting the learning behaviors of the students. A total of sixteen hours of classroom observations and 35 focus groups were conducted by this researcher and by Professor Maria Lekic. 400 weekly questionnaires were returned and subsequently analyzed.

The second research project I will discuss is the "Approaches to Cross-Training" project, carried out under the auspices of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center during 1996. The goals of this project were to determine whether third-language courses are more effective than second language courses, and to create a guidebook for federal program managers engaged in "Cross-training." Cross Training refers to the retraining of a speaker of one foreign language (e.g., French) to speak another (e.g., Haitian Creole.)

Research conducted for this project consisted of classroom observations, interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, and program managers in Serbo-Croatian courses. The typical student had achieved a proficiency level of 2 on the ILR scale in Listening, Speaking, and Reading in Russian as a second language. Some other Slavic languages were represented, including Polish and Czech. A total of 35 students participated in six focus groups; 18 teachers participated in five focus groups. Eight students were interviewed individually, as were three program administrators.

Additionally, the outcomes of the Serbo-Croatian courses were recorded - proficiency results and time allotted to the course - for comparison with Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center Serbo-Croatian Basic Courses. The research team consisted of this author and Victor Frank, of Bryn Mawr College. The research was jointly directed by Richard Brecht and the late Ron Walton, both of the National Foreign Language Center.

The third research project which I will report on is the "Evaluation of Immersion Training Programs," funded by the Defense Language Institute foreign Language Center. The goals of this project were to describe the different types of foreign language immersion training currently undertaken in the United States government, and to document the effects of immersion training. A number of ethnographic and quantitative methods were used to gather data for this project - survey instruments on learner behaviors, attitudes, and motivation; interviews with immersion participants; program observations; and proficiency tests. The research team consisted of Richard Brecht and Ron Walton, of the National Foreign Language Center, and Victor Frank and myself. The overall results of this project have been reported elsewhere (Brecht et al., in press). Of particular interest to the theme of this paper is the exhibition of self-managed and self-directed learning behaviors during immersion experiences, and the description of the in-country immersion experience itself as an environment existing primarily outside of formal learning situations - an environment requiring Self-Directed Language Learning.

4. Results

The third-language learners in the Languages of the Former Soviet Union Program uniformly exhibited two behaviors: learner autonomy and self-assessment. First, all students demonstrated varying degrees of learner autonomy. By autonomy, I mean learner attempts to seize control of the learning process, whether by requesting changes in sequence, approach, learning goals, materials, or environment. The clearest manifestation of learner autonomy was the demand for independent study time during the instructional week. Originally appearing in one student's weekly questionnaire, this demand was taken up by all of the participants in the Kazakh and Kyrgyz courses. This led to a change in the program for both courses, with one-half of one day being set aside for unstructured independent work. Further demands for additional unstructured time led to the setting aside of an entire day for independent work and one-on-one tutorials with the course instructors. Other manifestations included direct requests to the teachers and program managers for changes in classroom interaction (feedback from several of the instructors was reported to be both too harsh and not informative enough for the students) and changes in methodology, where the student perceived that the teaching method was ill suited to his or her learning style. One Kyrgyz instructor employed the *Emotional-Semantic Method*, which resembles both the Total Physical Response method and some elements of the Silent Way, such as the use of cuisenaire rods;[1] three of five students found some part of this method objectionable. The Kazakh teaching team favored a structural approach, with heavy emphasis early in the course on drilling. Several students objected to the drilling and written work, claiming that it "didn't work for [them]" or that "I learn differently."

This final demonstration of autonomy also represents the second behavior exhibited by the students in the program: self-assessment. Although no specific attempt was made to elicit such data, students invariably commented on their perceptions of their progress in the course, their strengths and weaknesses with regard to the language

[1] Used as a device for eliciting output. The teacher gives a student or students commands to manipulate specific rods: "put the red rod on end on the windowsill."

learning process, and the suitability of the course to their learner styles and learning strategy preferences. One student in the Kazakh course repeatedly stated her distaste for working at the blackboard, pointing out that the anxiety and negative affect she experienced far outweighed any positive effect of writing answers on the blackboard. Some students in the Kyrgyz course objected to singing in class, for reasons of discomfort and embarrassment; others felt that the same exercises were of benefit for memorizing lexicon and working on pronunciation. Furthermore, this opposition of learning strategy preferences within the group was reported by members of the group in their weekly questionnaires. That is, individual students evinced a keen awareness of others' learner type and learning strategy preferences, and of the effects of such mismatches within the group on the group as a whole.

Regarding the outcome of the courses, results were clear: all learners in all courses scored at the advanced level or higher on end-of-course listening and reading proficiency tests. The courses ran for 37 weeks (15 weeks for the Georgian course, which enrolled students with some knowledge of the language. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz students had no prior training in those languages.) All of these languages are classified as Level 3 languages by the Foreign Service Institute, requiring 44 weeks at 30 hours per week to reach Advanced level proficiency in Speaking, Reading, and Listening. The savings in time - 37 weeks at 25 hours per week, or 925 hours, versus 44 weeks at 30 hours per week, or 1320 hours - is dramatic evidence that experienced language learners do indeed learn faster than novice language learners.

With the result that experienced language learners constantly assess their overall performance, their learning strategy preferences, and their affective behaviors, the research team for the Cross-Training project sought to elicit such self-assessments in a systematic way. In particular, we were interested in whether these self-assessments were accurate. In order to provide some correlation of learners' self-assessments and their actual performance and behaviors, careful attention was paid to classroom observations and teacher assessments of the students' performance and behaviors. Moreover, in the elicitation procedures used with the students in focus groups and interviews, a careful attempt was made to elicit self-assessments on affect, anxiety, self-confidence, leaner type, learning strategy preferences, and classroom interactions. Further hypotheses regarding the experienced learner were also examined: that the experienced learner would exhibit autonomy, that the experienced learner would engage in a broad variety of social learning strategies, that the experienced learner would display a high degree of metalinguistic awareness, and that the experienced learner would exhibit self-directed learning behaviors.

All of these hypotheses were confirmed. Classroom observations yielded some examples of learner autonomy, in several different classes. Among the observed incidents were: the insistence of students in using the target language during a question-and-answer session on the reflexive in Serbo-Croatian (over the repeated insistence on English by the teacher); incidents of the same nature during various reading exercises; and a student's request for an analysis of individual words for their constituent morphemes, during a gisting exercise. When asked why she wanted to spend time on such a detail oriented activity when the stated task was to summarize a reading passage, the student said to the teacher "I like to look at roots." During the focus groups, students reported other examples of learner autonomy, including repeated requests to their teachers and program administrators to change the content of the materials used in the course: "[The course] is too wide ranging," "Give us the *Military Book*," (The *Military Book* is a standard component of DLI basic language courses at DLIFLC/Monterey. It is a dictionary of military terminology combined with a military phrase-book. The student completes the target language portion of the *Military Book* during the basic language course) "Give us more materials on refugees [in the former Yugoslavia.]" Autonomy precedes self-directed learning: learners must have both the opportunity and the desire to

direct their own learning. The third language learners interviewed for this project had both.

The second result of this ethnographic research project on third language learners is that third language learners assess their levels of anxiety and confidence and their needs in further acquiring the target language. In order to examine learners' assessment of their confidence, we asked learners the following questions: 1) "At what point in this course did you think you could succeed in this language?" 2) "At what point in your basic course at DLI did you think you could succeed in that language?" Answers to the first question ranged from "on the first day" to "after two months." Answers to the second question ranged from "ten months" to "never." All students claimed that they felt confident of their success in Serbo-Croatian much sooner than in their second language courses. In order to examine the learners' self-assessment of their needs in learning Serbo-Croatian, we asked what their strengths and weaknesses were. An answer typical in its forthrightness was: "Verbs suck. They don't stick in my head." From the same learner: "I'm a grammar guy. I love grammar. I love gerunds, participles .... I like to work on declensions. I make funny sentences to memorize grammar." This learner responded by using a strength - a love of verbal morphology - to remedy a weakness - the rote memorization of verbs. This response is typical in that the learner assessed both strengths and weaknesses, and took action to remedy the weakness.

The most important finding in the data from the interviews and focus groups was that the majority of students demonstrated self-directed learning behaviors. These included making vocabulary flashcards (of which several variations occurred); making tables of target language declension and conjugation; making wall charts of semantically related vocabulary (a variation on flash-cards, but one employing a different approach and strategies than the rote memorization of flashcards); acquiring and distributing target language videos through unofficial channels; writing compositions, typically not assigned and sometimes not wanted by the teacher; having a computer shipped to the student in order to chat on-line with native speakers and download target language material from the World Wide Web; engaging in target language conversations outside of the instructional program, in bars, on the subway, and in the dormitory; and attending social events at embassies and in the local émigré community.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The two projects which I have described bear the following results with respect to third-language learners:

- the third-language learner is an autonomous learner;

- the third-language learner is a self-aware learner;

- the third-language learner is a confident learner;

- the third-language learner is a self-directed leaner.

If one considers this set of attributes, one finds striking similarity to the Good Language Learner. Rubin's seminal article (1975) and subsequent work by other researchers[2] identify the good language learner and establish a list of traits shared by good language learners: attention to form, attention to function, flexibility in the use of learning

[2] See Stern, 1975; Naiman et al, 1978; Huang and Van Naerssen, 1985; Chamot et al., 1978; Reiss, 1983 and 1985; Gillette, 1987; Lennon, 1989; Ellis, 1994.

strategies, and awareness of the learning process. The attributes of the good language learner constitute a fair portrait of the third language learner. In addition, descriptive studies of the language learning background of good language learners reveal that they are often third language learners.[3]

Other researchers have reported that experienced and third-language learners exhibit more metalinguistic awareness than second language learners (Thomas, 1985, 1988, 1992; Bartlet 1989; Ramsay, 1980.) In her work on third language learners of French, Thomas shows that the third language learner exhibits a greater awareness of what language is, and how languages work. She also found that the third language learner can explicitly state this awareness. Our results confirmed this finding. The students in the Serbo-Croatian courses had a large reserve of knowledge to draw upon, pertaining to the phonetics, morphology, and syntax of Slavic languages. Moreover, the participants stated exactly what knowledge of which domains helped (or hindered) them at specific times during the Serbo-Croatian course. Furthermore, the participants claimed an expectation that, while Serbo-Croatian shares many similar features with Russian (or Polish or Czech), differences in form and function were to be expected.

These studies have shown that the most distinctive trait of third language learners - self-directed language learning - manifests itself in the ways, ranging from the expected and common use of flash-cards to aid in vocabulary development, to the use of internet and World Wide Web resources for target language input and practice. Examples of self-directed language learning behaviors typically occur with minimal intervention from the teacher or the program in which the learner is enrolled. Indeed, self-directed language learning often occurs *in spite of* teachers or programs - learners who perceive that their needs are unmet will assert autonomy and attempt to meet their needs in the face of ignorance of, indifference to, or outright hostility to their efforts.

What does self-directed language learning imply for the practice of Russian language teaching? Jorden and Walton (1987) have shown that many beginning students studying languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, and other Less Commonly Taught Languages in college already know some other foreign language.[4] Similar trends occur in US government training programs. Ehrman and Oxford (1995) shows that almost 75% of Foreign Service Institute language students, regardless of target language, are third language learners. The first implication of third language learning is that courses in the Less Commonly Taught Languages must include self-directed language learning.[5] Therefore, third language learners often find themselves in second language courses. This affects both teachers and learners. The course designer and teacher must assume a different role than in purely second language courses. This requires that teachers develop an awareness of learner styles and strategies, that teachers provide instruction to students in learner styles and learner strategies,[6] and that teachers move from being lecturers in front of groups of language students to counselors of individual students. Programs and courses for third language learners in the Less Commonly Taught Languages must be structured to provide greater opportunities for authentic target language input and practice, and students must be given the time to engage in these activities.

The second implication for the teaching of Russian is that language learners can and must be prepared to learn outside of formal programs. This includes immersion (study abroad) as well as field- or career-based learning. In these situations, learners

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[3] See Reiss, 1983; Stevick, 1989, Lennon, 1989; Brecht et al, 1990, 1993, Ginsburg, 1992.

[4] See also Moore et al., 1992; Jorden and Lambert, 1991; Brecht et al., 1993.

[5] Direct comparison of FSI third language student enrollments to academic LCTL third language student enrollments is difficult, as data on the former do not distinguish among target languages, and data on the latter are scarce.

[6] Betty Leaver advocates this in all language classrooms. See Leaver, 1993.

remain outside of a structured program for the majority, if not the entirety, of the language learning process and must manage their own language learning. In the Evaluation of Immersion Training Project, interviews with immersion course participants revealed a high degree of self-directed learning. One learner enrolled in a special in-country course for listening and reading. She then decided that she needed work on speaking, and proceeded to structure her extracurricular activities to gain exposure to the broadest possible range of interlocutors. She went as far as to shop for an apartment which she had no intention of renting. In essence, the student managed the input in the immersion environment for her perceived needs, controlling how, what, and when she learned.

With regard to immersion programs, students must be prepared to select their target language input and manage their target language output in order to survive. There are tremendous possible benefits and risks for the in-country immersion learner, in terms of actual survival as well as language learning. The results of research on study abroad participants[7] demonstrate the adverse consequences of placing inexperienced learners outside of formal learning environments: these language learners may not learn. The prototypical example of an inexperienced language learner abroad is the student who simply opts out of the culture, sitting in her room and studying, or hanging out with English-speaking acquaintances. Victor Frank and Valerie Pellegrino both report extensively on this phenomenon.

The second type of language learning outside of formal classroom-based learning is field- and career- based language learning, where the learner is now out of a formal educational environment and required to use the language for professional purposes. The proficiency results of U.S. college and government language training programs, regardless of language, all but require students acquire additional language if they wish to perform at employable proficiency levels.[8] Students must be prepared to leave formal programs and continue to learn the language. Language learners who will continue to learn outside of formal programs must be trained in assessing their own learning needs, and meeting them in the absence of structured curricula. This requires explicit instruction in how to direct one's own learning, as well as practice in self-directed language learning. In turn, practice in self-directed language learning requires the many of the same changes mentioned for courses in the Less Commonly Taught Languages: instruction to students in learner styles and learner strategies, the structuring of programs and courses to provide greater opportunities for authentic target language input and practice, and the provision to students of the time to engage in these activities. Ideally, all students should enjoy the advantages of the third language learner; instruction in self-directed learning is a first step towards that goal.

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[7] See Frank, 1995; Brecht and Robinson, 1993; Pellegrino, 1994.

[8] See Carroll, 1967; Inman, 1980; Brecht et al., 1995; Thompson, 1996; Weinstein, 1975; Lambert and Moore, 1990.

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